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Rediscovering Indiana's Role in the Underground Railroad

INDIANAPOLIS – Twigs snap, leaves crackle, every breath seems to pierce the silence, and every step threatens exposure. Still, the North Star shines brightly and the hope of freedom presses forward.

The vast network of ravines, back roads, trails, creek beds, canyons, rivers and valleys that slaves followed on their journey to freedom became known as the Underground Railroad. Many of these routes led fugitive slaves through Indiana.

Representatives from 19 Indiana counties have formed the Indiana Underground Railroad Coalition to draw attention to Indiana's role in the Underground Railroad, and to develop exhibits and tours highlighting Indiana's connection to the Underground Railroad. The coalition is made up of representatives from Bartholomew, Clark, Decatur, Dearborn, Fayette Floyd, Franklin, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson, Jennings, Ohio, Ripley, Rush, Scott, Switzerland, Union, Washington and Wayne counties.

With the research compiled, the coalition is now well underway on the second phase of its project, collateral and exhibit design.

"All the information in the world won't do us a bit of good if we can't share that knowledge with people that can use it," said project coordinator Melanie Maxwell. "We've gathered the information and are now working on putting it into exhibits and driving tours between three gateway locations of Indiana's Underground Railroad."

Using a grant received last November, the coalition has hired Media Link, a marketing and media services business out of Madison Indiana, to develop a brochure that will lead travelers on driving tours that cross through the counties, discussing the Underground Railroad used in Indiana. The brochure will contain history, photos and maps for the different driving routes as well as information on activities that travelers can participate in today such as hiking and biking trails, workshops and re-enactments.

The coalition has also hired Scot Donaldson of Have Design Will Travel to manage the design of three separate exhibits at three gateway locations of Indiana's Underground Railroad. These gateway sites, including the Carnegie Center for Art and History in New Albany, Historic Eleutherian College in Lancaster, and the Levi and Catharine Coffin House in Fountain City, were chosen for their importance to Indiana's role in the Underground Railroad. Each of the three sites will have a different exhibit providing travelers with information about the location and the surrounding area as well as the Underground Railroad as a whole.

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The coalition hopes to have the driving tours in place by January 1, 2006.

For more information about the project, contact Jeannie Regan-Dinius with the Indiana Underground Railroad Initiative administered through the Indiana Department of Natural Resources' Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology at 317/232-1646 or jrdinius@dnr.in.gov.

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